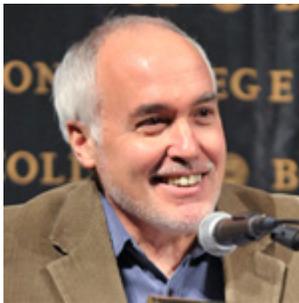


2008 FALL SYMPOSIUM
ONE NATION UNDER GOD?
The Role of Religion in American Public Life
November 22, 2008, Robsham Theater, Boston College

SESSION 1: How Religion Shapes American Culture

DAVID TEBALDI: The mission of Mass Humanities is to enhance and improve civic life across the Commonwealth and it is a noble mission and if you'd like to be involved in that mission, I'd encourage you to peruse our new website at www.masshumanities.org and sign up for eNews or our print newsletter. It's a brand new website. We're quite proud of it and I think you'll be quite impressed with the range of programs and the grants that we offer.



David Tebaldi

We depend on support of people like you to make programs like this happen. The animating vision of Mass Humanities derives from Thomas Jefferson. "I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of government," Jefferson wrote, "but the people themselves. And if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their authority with a wholesome discretion, the cure is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion." By sponsoring projects that bring history, literature, philosophy, and the other humanities disciplines to bear on topics and issues of interest to the people of our state, Mass Humanities fosters this democratic ideal of an informed and enlightened citizenry.

Our fifth annual symposium, *One Nation Under God?: The Role of Religion in American Public Life*, is in keeping with this ideal and we are pleased to have you with us here today to participate in what we know will be an informative and provocative series of conversations with some of our country's most distinguished journalists, writers, scholars, and practitioners.

Our first panel will explore the ways in which religion has shaped American culture and as well perhaps how American society influences religion. Our moderator is well known to many of you. Alan Wolfe is professor of Political Science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life here at Boston College. He is the author of more than a dozen influential books, including most recently, "Does American Democracy Still Work?," "Return to Greatness: How America Lost Its Sense of Purpose and What It Needs to Do to Recover It," and apropos the topic for this afternoon, "The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith," which is available for sale in the Kresge Room.

I'll turn it over to Alan and Alan will introduce his panelists to you. Thank you.

WOLFE: Well, thank you. We're going to have an informal discussion on the general topic of how religion shapes American culture and how American culture shapes religion. There are detailed biographies of our participants in your program. I'll just say one or two words about them and then begin the discussion. We have Mark Lilla, professor of Humanities and Religion at Columbia University and author of a recent book called, "The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West." And next to Mark is Peter J. Paris of the Princeton Theological Seminary where he's the Elmer G. Homrighausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics and the liaison with the Princeton University African American Studies Program and has written a number of books including, "Virtues and Values: The African and African American Experience."



Alan Wolfe

A good friend of Boston College sits immediately to my right, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels. Peggy is co-director of the Fordham University Center on Religion and Culture and was the long-term editor of *Commonwealth Magazine*, one of the liveliest and most important small magazines in shaping how we understand American culture and American religion. And Jon Meacham who's the editor of *Newsweek* and has just published a book, "American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House," which is receiving extraordinary critical acclaim and great public attention and Jon, welcome as well to Boston College. So which is it? Is religion more shaped by American culture or is American culture shaped more by religion? What's the interaction between the two? Who cares to begin? Peggy?

STEINFELS: Well, this kind of question reminds me of one of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons with the – whoever landed at Plymouth Rock. Pilgrims? Puritans? Whoever.

WOLFE: (laughter) One of them.

STEINFELS: One of them. And one is saying to the other, I've come for religious freedom but I hope to get into real estate and it seems to me that at least part of the story of religion in culture is they are so intertwined at some periods in our history that it is pretty hard to separate them out and say one is dominant over the other. I think we can probably say that for many decades, Protestantism in particular and its subset denominationalism did set a kind of foundation for the culture we have now and obviously for our Constitutional system.

WOLFE: But if – well, I’ll turn it to somebody else. I mean if they really influence each other, if it’s almost difficult at some times to tell the difference between them, what does that say? I mean religion is after all supposed to be about something otherworldly, something not of this world, something more spiritual or more holy whereas cultural we usually think of as more in the realm of the profane and more in the realm of the every day. Jon?

MEACHAM: I think – just quick on the real estate point. I once counted up the – I don’t know if they got into the subprime thing here –

STEINFELS: Only later.

MEACHAM: Later. I once counted the Jamestown Charter words, the number of



Jon Meacham

words about God and religion I think were about 76 words out of about 33,700, quickly moving to copper, gold, and how they were to send it back as quickly as possible while establishing of course a Christian commonwealth. My sense is that they – I agree with Alan’s characterization. I think they are intrinsically intertwined and I think that the genius of the founding was that they recognized that. It’s as though you’re trying to isolate how do economics shape culture? How does geography shape culture?

Well, it shapes it the way it shapes it and I don’t – religion may be about things that are otherworldly but also for many believers, it’s simply about the way they conduct themselves on this side of paradise and so I think it’s like the air we breathe.

WOLFE: Peter? Mark?

PARIS: I sort of agree that there’s an integral relationship between religion and



Peter J. Paris

culture but I would say that when you’re thinking about American culture, I like to think of it as two cultures and two religions at least and that is the religion and the culture of those that are in the ruling body and the religion and culture of those who are outside of that ruling establishment, the ruling culture, the ruling religious ethos. And more specifically, there was a body of people who were enslaved, African peoples for a century and a half before the nation was formed into a republic and those

people came with a culture and a religion and they made claims for being a part of the body politic that was being formed but ironically when the Constitution was being adopted in Philadelphia in 1787, just six blocks away, at Lombard and Sixth Avenue, Richard Allen was forming the Free African Society that was outside of the Constitution fully and yet was

struggling against slavery which was not resolved by the Constitution and struggling against the dehumanization and the humiliation that attended that institution. And so you have that struggle that has gone on right up until the present day and still not completely resolved, either culturally or religiously.

WOLFE: What I'd like to do is get each of the panelists to offer their general perspective on the culture religion nexus and then we can come back to any of these points. So Mark.

LILLA: Yeah, I guess I've been thinking mainly more about the reciprocal influence of American culture on religion to begin with. Even to talk about it in those terms I think is wrong because we sometimes, especially in popular journalism, have a kind of body snatchers model of religious life and the question is how are these people whose bodies have been snatched affecting everybody else but religion is part of American culture. That's what's different here. It's not religion *and*. And those other parts of our culture have had a tremendous influence on American religion just in my lifetime. From the age of 13 until 20, I was part of the Catholic Pentecostal movement in a working class area in Detroit where Catholic and Protestant Evangelicals mixed easily and when I think about what we cared about then and what Evangelicals care about now, it's changed enormously and we don't – except for Alan really, there's no one else who pays much attention to this it seems to me.



Mark Lilla

In those groups, we didn't talk much about politics. Half of us wore McGovern buttons in 1972. We all wore Carter buttons in '76, in part because we thought he was one of us and he was a liberal. We didn't talk much about abortion. It was still illegal in Michigan at that time and homosexuality was something you could not even mention in conversation. The families, however, on the other hand were very traditional and hierarchical. None of the women worked. Children listened to their parents and didn't talk back. Families were very strict. No television.

STEINFELS: New York was different.

LILLA: And then there was no connection with popular culture in those families. When you walk into an American religious bookstore today, you see the effects of our cultural changes on American religion. I mean the worst effect from my point of view is the decline of gospel and blues music and the rise of whatever these other things are and when you go to the CD collection there, you'll find Christian rap, Christian R&B, Christian – and it's as fractured as American musical culture is today. But on the other hand, American Evangelical families seem to be much looser. There are two wage earners.

Kids look pretty much like kids everywhere else. The music sounds the same except for the word Jesus appears now and again and they're a lot more relaxed about homosexuality.

Abortion is a separate issue and that becomes a kind of flash point and they're more politically conservative but just in my lifetime, when I look – I mean just to close up, when I look at someone like Sarah Palin, just in terms of coming from that religious world, there was no one like that in the Evangelical world I knew in the 1970s. She's a strong, dynamic woman, comfortable with all sorts of things they wouldn't have been. She speaks less well than most of us did then but otherwise, she represents – for me, she's a sign of how much that world has changed.

WOLFE: Well, this is I think a very good way to pose what's really at stake in this discussion because there is in a sense I think an important agenda here. Jon Meacham and others have written about and talked a lot about the extraordinary American experimentation with separation of church and state but what I think we increasingly realize is just because church and state are separate in the United States doesn't mean that church and culture are. In fact, if religion is a powerful force, as powerful as it is and it is in some ways legally or Constitutionally prohibited from influencing the state, it will influence the culture all that much more. It will spill out. So I guess Mark talks a little bit about some of the advantages that we've seen in a kind of – to the effect that American culture has loosened stricter forms of American religion and I think we can see some of the advantages but aren't there disadvantages as well?

Haven't we lost the serious language of sin and redemption and other worldliness that religion is supposed to offer us? So if religion has become Sarah Palin, has something been lost? Something that – some serious tone has been lost in the process? Anyone?

MEACHAM: That's a lot to hang on Governor Palin I think.

WOLFE: I was just using his –

MEACHAM: Not that she doesn't –

WOLFE: But you know, just to get off that embarrassing point, maybe I can ask Peter here who talked about how we have two cultures from the beginning in the United States. Certainly one of the great contributions of the Black church has been its prophetic voice. If religion and culture become much more intertwined, don't we lose the capacity to be prophetic because prophetic means that you have to stand – it's Christ against culture in a very, very fundamental way. In fact, that's almost the definition of prophecy – to

stand against the culture. Have we lost that charismatic, that prophetic voice?

PARIS: Well, it seems to me that there is a variety of forms that the relationship of religion and culture can take. You can have one that posits religion as being otherworldly and culture being this worldly. You can have another that sees the integral relationship between the two and that would be those that have established churches or desire established churches. And then there can be those where there would be no prophetic element and others that are more prophetic, seeing the injustices, the issues and problems and constantly calling the religion to its more pristine state.

My problem is when I hear the term religion and culture, even as it's posed in the program, it implies some normative definition of American religion and culture and that's what I resist because I say that it doesn't really jive with the historical realities of life in this country and that we have had people from the beginning who were on the outside of the culture. All of the forces of culture and religion brought to bear to keep them on the outside and they themselves struggling for equalization, equal treatment under the general norms of liberty and justice and equality for all and it seems to me that we have to loosen up the subject in order to contain the plurality that we have always had here on this soil, the American soil, striving to form a body politic that would be respectful of all of that plurality. One could say respectful of the Native Americans, of the African Americans, and of Asian Americans and so forth.

STEINFELS: It partly depends on what you mean by prophetic. I was thinking about this this morning and I went online and uncovered the following. That in September 2002, the following church bodies raised questions about the imminent move into Iraq by the United States military: the Episcopal, the Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian Church USA, the OCA, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Disciples of Christ, UCC, etc., to say nothing of several national bodies and as this document I was reading said, and the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Now that's not every religious body in the United States, that's for sure, but in some ways, I think religion does function, not always successfully in this case obviously, as a conscience or a call to reflection about what it is the country is, or in this case was, embarking on. It seems to me it is religious communities who have been the greatest opponents to the torture regime of the Bush administration and that the most serious opposition to that is the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. So it seems to me this all works at several levels and I certainly do not contest Professor Paris's point about the diversity and the differences in the inside and the outside and yet, I



Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

think within American culture, religion generically continues to play an important role. The Civil Rights Movement, for one, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. I mean we can go through a list of all our difficulties since I was born and see that in some way, religious communities and institutions brought things at least to a public forum for reflection and discussion, if not to end those things always.

LILLA: But don't you think, Margaret, that even there there are differences. It strikes me how when people talk about the prophetic tradition, how selective they are depending on where they stand. Liberal Catholics, the kind of people who read *Commonweal*, seem very comfortable with political prophecy and not so comfortable with cultural prophecy. That is what you should do to transform your life, your sexual life, your family life, and to bring it into line with a certain understanding of the gospel.

STEINFELS: Do you read every issue?

LILLA: I don't read every issue, no, but it's very different from the line you'll hear from Protestant Evangelicals whose focus is so heavily on those sorts of things and that's why I'd be interested to hear Peter talk about the kind of cultural seepage into American religion that has affected the Black church and Black church goes because I have an understanding of what that's like in white Protestant and Catholic churches. But I don't on the other side. So one can see and can imagine there have been changes in relaxation of certain morals and relaxation in the family, an embrace of popular music but on the other hand, there seems to be resistance to the general shift in the culture about acceptance of homosexuality from what one reads. So I'd be interested to know just how you see this diversity actually play out in what's going on in the Black church now.

PARIS: I would say that it plays out in diverse ways. It is completely wrong I think to essentialize the Black church or the Black churches by thinking of all of them as being prophetic, or all of them being oriented towards the issues of justice, even racial justice in the same way. It may surprise people to know that at the height of the Civil Rights Movement there was probably not more than about 15 or 20% of the Black churches that were engaged in the Civil Rights struggle. Others were sympathetic towards it but they were more accommodative to the structures of segregation.

Interestingly enough, even the Montgomery Bus Boycott at the very beginning, Martin Luther King Jr. and the people around him carried on the negotiations with the city of Montgomery without calling into question the segregational system but rather accepted that as a given and were asking for more respect towards the Black customers who were paying the same amount of money to come onto the buses, not even challenging the business of a colored line at the beginning of the buses but saying that there should be an

agreed upon imaginary line, maybe the third row of seats, up to the third row would be reserved for whites and then you would have come as you may. And so all of this was being carried on without calling into question segregation and this was Martin Luther King Jr. and the beginning of the movement but when the fathers of the city literally said no, we will not negotiate this issue then that served to radicalize the demands for an attack on the system itself.

So what I'm saying is that there is this diversity that I'm thinking of in terms of Black culture and white culture and Black religion and white religion does not imply essentialism on either side but that there is tremendous diversity on both sides and then there's diversity in the interaction between them on both the religion and the cultural levels.

LILLA: Yeah, but look, there is diversity, there's essentialism, and there are statistics and the statistics on Black attitudes towards homosexuality, especially among the religious –

PARIS: I'm not disputing that. I agree with that.

LILLA: No, no, but I want to know more about it. That's why I'm asking. What is that about? And the recent vote in California. What things in American culture have helped to change things in the Black churches recently and what things have not been touched like, for example, the homosexuality issue.

WOLFE: I'd like to get Jon's perspective.

MEACHAM: Just very quickly. I'd submit that the most significant cultural event arguably not quite of my lifetime but damn near happened about three weeks ago, which was the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th President of the United States. Having and I know Amy – I saw Amy Sullivan here, who has forgotten more about this than I know but I'll – she works at a small magazine, I think it's still weekly. I'll think of it in a second. This is ecumenical. The God Gap, which Amy has written brilliantly about, shrank in almost every discernable category between 2004 and 2008. So insofar as a presidential election is an expression where the culture is at a given moment, I'm actually more cheerful about this than I have been since I've been thinking about these things.

Three years ago or so if we'd been talking about this, we would have been talking a lot more about where you were headed and actually the conflict, the cultural conflicts over abortion, gay rights, the intelligent design debate at the time. A good bit of that – nothing is ever settled in this country thanks to our founders, but at least they seem to be calmer and there seems to be a bit more consensus. I think I'm right that – was it 69% of Evangelicals said that even if they didn't vote for Obama, they believed that he shared their values?

69%. That's an extraordinary number I think and so to some extent, I think this goes to the point that religion, the Democratic Party decided that they would talk it to death. There's a classic situation where you just, if you wanted to neutralize something, bring them in and talk to them. So they talked and talked and talked. There were so many faith forums in the Democratic primary season that I think they're still going on actually.

WOLFE: This is actually one of them.

MEACHAM: Yeah. Well, in a weird way. I mean Chris Dodd is still talking about his faith somewhere. So it was a great achievement in that if you let the sunlight in, things become demystified and a little less contentious I think and I guess my argument would be we lived in one country – this is a non-partisan point despite what people think about *Newsweek*, we lived in one country on the third of the November 2008 and we lived in another one on the fifth of November and one of the ways we got through the fourth was that the Democratic nominee for president managed to take the best of the traditions we're talking about.



Jon Meacham, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, Alan Wolfe, Peter J. Paris, Mark Lilla

I think talking in the language of social responsibility that can be inspired by either a secular concern for one's fellow man or a theocentric one, using that language quite explicitly and managing to reassure a number of people who since the 22nd of January 1973 have believed that their government is involved in the destruction of human life and therefore is fundamentally untrustworthy, that's been assuaged a bit. That's a remarkable moment in the culture and I think it came about because he and a lot of other people respected people of faith and yet pressed the role of reason and found a remarkable personal pleading Anglican balance. There are six of us left. Some of you may be here.

WOLFE: I actually think I see a way to link Mark's question that I think we need to address with yours and that would be this: that you're right, this election did bring something to an end. I think we all sense that 2008 was a historic election and that among the things that made it historic, not only including the race of the candidate who won, was that the religion gap seems to have come to an end or have been transformed. So how about this as what's really at stake here? That the era that ended in which we had religion playing such a powerful and divisive role in American life, that the problem with that era was not that religion and religious views were expressed by people in the voting booth because surely we should want that. The prophetic side of

religion says you know, that we ought to want people to base their views on some deep understanding of God and the relationship with God, that that can't in and of itself be wrong.

What was problematic was that when you have a political system that overlaps exactly with the religious division then you get a problem because the deep religious differences become translated into a political sphere where they can't be compromised and since the role of politics is to compromise, that becomes the danger. So the era that came to an end, the problem with it in a sense was that conservative religious people and conservative political people were on one side and liberal religious people and liberal political people were on the other. Now that's where Mark's important question about Proposition 8 comes in because Proposition 8 in California it seems was defeated because liberal political people, overwhelmingly African American, voted on conservative religious grounds that homosexuality was a sin.

And without taking a position on whether Proposition 8 should have been passed or shouldn't have been passed and without even taking a position on the whole question of homosexuality, is it or isn't it in a sense "good" to have that kind of balance where you cannot predict someone's political views from their religious views and vice versa. Shouldn't we want, in other words, some people who are liberal politically to vote on conservative religious grounds and some people who are conservative religiously to vote on liberal –

PARIS: But that's where –

WOLFE: So be it.

STEINFELS: You know, Richard Thompson Ford who wrote "Playing the Race Card," a really interesting book that came out last spring, had a piece on *Slate* last week, so you can all recover it, in which he talks about whether the Black vote for Obama was in fact the critical –

WOLFE: OK, there you go. Empirical facts.

STEINFELS: Issue. Well, I mean if –

MEACHAM: Facts.

STEINFELS: His point partly was –

MEACHAM: Stubborn things.

STEINFELS: What are people really concerned about on this issue and his point was that more than a civil rights issue or an equal rights issue he believes that

it is a question of gender relationships and partly reproductive relationships and that people are anxious about these questions and he trotted out some figures showing that people, in fact, in California are not opposed to same sex unions. It is partly the marriage question that is under siege in the view of the people who voted for Proposition 8 and I thought he made a reasonable case for the idea that there are other things at work here than race and religion and I mean touching on some of people's most basic ideas about how the world works. Now they may be rooted in religion as well as in culture but anyway, I'd just insert that. Excuse me.

PARIS: I wanted to say that the categories of liberal and conservative are limited in how much of the reality they can explain. The Black churches, for instance, are sort of of one mind when it comes to their opposition against racial reasoning which has captivated historically the white churches and the white political domain. The idea of racializing the world of humanity into higher and lower forms of humanity. Blacks have been opposed to that. Does that make them liberal? I don't think so. It makes them opposed to that issue and advocates of justice and equality on the issues pertaining to race but on issues pertaining to sexuality, they are to the right of Attila the Hun, you know? And on issues both in terms of homosexuality and lesbianism and so forth and in terms of ordination of women for different reasons but like the Roman Catholics, oppose completely to that.

The National Baptist Convention, with its ten million members, is opposed to it, as is the Church of God in Christ with its five million members or whatever. Or even larger than that and going global and at that point, on the issues of sexuality and gender, they join ranks with cultures around the world for all kinds of different reasons that have a similar position. How does one – it's not strictly religion that is the driving force here or strictly culture that's the driving force but it is again various religions and cultures coming together in their opposition to this body of humanity.

MEACHAM: Can I throw one in from my tradition? I'm an Episcopalian. We're involved in sort of the same thing in which the largely white Episcopalians of South Carolina are delighted to now accept the spiritual lordship of the Arch Bishop of Nigeria.

PARIS: Sure.

MEACHAM: Because of this.

PARIS: Sure. Exactly.

MEACHAM: You know, a generation ago they wouldn't have let him in their house.

PARIS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MEACHAM: But now they're – and it is – I mean that's –

PARIS: A generation ago, they didn't know where Nigeria was.

MEACHAM: The world is flat indeed but I do think there is a matrix of concerns that I'd argue go back to exactly what you're saying. I think the liberal conservative categories are particularly unhelpful and religion again is like economic interest I think. It's something that is one thread in a tapestry about how we decide things. I don't think it's the whole tapestry for a large, large number of Americans who are engaged in the culture and in our politics.

WOLFE: Mark, are you satisfied with these responses?

LILLA: Well, whenever I hear the word consensus, I reach for my pillow so I want to find some way to stir up the waters a little bit. Not in terms of the things that everyone is seeing. I mean this is interesting actually even to know about the attitudes towards ordination of women which I had no idea about. But let's take it for granted that there is a kind of growing social consensus where people identify themselves as religious which is most Americans largely and others. It seems to me that you would expect just almost by some law of religious thermodynamics that there would then at the edges spill out a kind of separatist impulse and that that might be this prophetic moment when people say that the union of a kind of liberal democratic consensus, open minded, everyone's nice, everyone believes in diversity.

People who do not share that will reject the whole package and I'm curious to know how significant people here think that is. Hanna Rosin is supposed to be here. I don't know her but I know her books and she wrote a very good book on the kind of separatist impulse in higher education in some of these Evangelical sects and it also brings up the question of Islam. I mean if American culture has this slow transforming effect on American religion, you assume it's because you're open to American culture but I'm curious to know whether people think that will happen, will always be the case with American Muslims. It has been so far. And also whether in these other traditions you see people who want to opt out of the consensus.

WOLFE: Anybody?

STEINFELS: I am curious. I mean I have observed the curious phenomenon in New York City now of what used to be the Christian Jewish dialogue inching toward the Christian Jewish Muslim dialogue and it's kind of fascinating to watch because in some ways, Christians and Jews have been doing this now for a couple of decades and there are the rituals and routines of this and how

the Islamic conversation partner on these panels sort of works into that and what they represent from the Islamic world. All I'm saying is I think there are traditions of these conversations and forums for them and yet it seems to me that Islam as it is emerging in the United States still in many ways resembles the Catholic church in the 19th century and Jose Casanova has written pretty brilliantly about what did the Catholic Church have to go through in order to actually sit down and have a – well, he doesn't – this is not where he goes but the Christian Jewish, Catholic Jewish dialogue had to come about after many enormous changes inside Catholicism.

And whether Islam will go through that process if not in Saudi Arabia apparently but would it happen in the United States or will it remain a separatist religious tradition? And I don't think we know that answer yet.

WOLFE: Well, correct me if I'm wrong, Mark, but I sense that there was a normative edge to your question as well as an empirical and or descriptive one. Descriptively, I think there's no doubt if we look back at American history consensus becomes a very powerful by-product of American culture, that there is pressure towards consensus. So you used to have one religion called Christianity and one religion called Judaism and then low and behold, something is invented called the Judeo-Christian tradition that finds somehow a consensus between religions that were once at war with one another and I believe and there's already evidence to suggest that now Muslims will find a way to get into that and we'll find a new term.

M: Abrahamic.

WOLFE: Well, Abrahamic doesn't quite work because then we have the next group behind them that isn't Abraham, but something like that. So empirically speaking, it seems to me we can pretty much conclude that American culture does promote consensus and dissolve difference. The question is whether that's a good thing or not. Maybe I can introduce that question by saying something that really – because you brought up the election and Barack Obama. I mean I found myself after the election, what do I read now that the election's over besides Amy Sullivan and Jon Meacham and Hanna Rosin and anyone else, Steve Waldman, everyone else who's here. But what do I read now?

And I found myself, although I'm not a Christian, particularly fascinated with a discussion on some of the more conservative blogs about whether Barack Obama was a Christian and I actually found it absolutely absorbing and fascinating because some people were saying look, it means something. This term Christian. There were creeds, you know? They're important. You have to believe in them and they were arguing that based upon what Christianity has traditionally meant, and I won't go into the theology because that's not my field, Obama simply wasn't one – that his public statements on

religion either showed ignorance of or contradiction with the most fundamental creeds that Christianity has evolved over the centuries. Now why did I find that fascinating?

I mean at one level, the consensus instinct is to say the guy says he's a Christian, that's end of discussion and if you say you're one, you are one, but from a deeply religious or theological standpoint, that can't possibly be the way you answer that question. But then if we're going to investigate people's beliefs and ask are they authentically this or that, aren't we in an inquisitorial world where the consequence of that will be that we'll all be passing judgment on each other and before you know it, instead of consensus, we'll have the exact opposite of some kind of Hobbesian war. And since you write about Hobbes, is that kind of where your question goes or does anyone else want to . . . ?

PARIS: Well, it seems to me that you asked the question at one point in that discussion of consensus as to whether it's good or not and I think that's the key issue. I think you can have lots of consensi but they can be very bad, depending upon your perspective. There was a grand consensus at the time of the forming of the American Constitution around the slave trade and it was such a consensus that they decided to allow it to stand for another 20 years and it wasn't abolished until 1808, 20 years after the Constitution, but was that a good thing? Was that a good consensus? Some people would say well, it depends upon your perspective. We did get on the way towards having a republic of some sort.

It seems to me that there was a grand consensus around Enlightenment understandings of humanity for a long, long while and one could say that what is beginning to happen here in America and elsewhere in the Western world is a critical assessment or reassessment of the nature of humanity as conceived in the Enlightenment and that it's very, very difficult to pull yourself away from that tradition and one probably shouldn't pull oneself away from it in any complete way but in order to allow reason to be unencumbered by the racism and the xenophobia that attended the Enlightenment project. That has been a long, painful process and that we here in the US are benefiting to some extent by our grappling with that kind of tradition that we have inherited.

But other people outside of US are also doing the same thing and a lot of these people are coming together in a loose kind of way around something that is like the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, that everybody who ascribes to that doesn't agree fully with one another about it but nevertheless, there's tremendous need for more and more growth along these lines.

WOLFE: We're in the transition period to when the audience is going to start raising their questions so let's bring – go ahead.

STEINFELS: You know, Alan, it seems to me that one of the things that enters in here is the phenomenon of your knowing what all these conservative Christian groups are saying. Fifteen years ago you would have had to actually go into one of their churches to hear that. Now in the privacy of your own office you can overhear these conversations and I think the amplification that is available to all of us from whatever, the Internet or whatever is the next thing, makes us far more conscious of the diversity and these people may have been talking like this 20 and 30 and 40 years ago and none of us who were not part of that tradition would know that and I do think that is the way – I mean we need to factor into the religion culture question that very amplification of information about what people in religious groups are saying when they think they're talking to themselves.

MEACHAM: Which immediately raises definitional questions about a religious group. I mean we did a piece this week on the people who believe that Obama is the anti-Christ.

LILLA: He's what?

WOLFE: The anti-Christ.

MEACHAM: The anti-Christ. You don't talk about that on every Saturday? And so it's out there in that sense and worth sort of poking around on but I think that you've got – I think there's a huge generational element here too. I think there's a lot of younger people for whom some of these debates sound like Thermopylae and about as relevant and again, we're in a situation where an African American just carried Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida which I just don't think even four years ago if we'd been sitting on this stage on a cold November day we would have said was possible. I think this changes very rapidly.

LILLA: If I could just say a brief thing to come back to what was behind my question which is not a normative thought or impulse but rather a question that I would just like to leave us with here and it's not just about the relationship between religion and culture in America but around the world. One hypothesis is that there's something about Biblical religion that whenever it accommodates itself to the way of the world, compromises, reaches a consensus, there's another impulse within these religions to bring the judgment of God down on a sinful world. If these religions mean anything, they mean that. Now so one hypothesis is that when you have consensus, you're going to have reaction of some sort eventually.

Second hypothesis is there's simply something different about America and what America has brought into the world where that's no longer happening here and to the extent that our culture affects the rest of the world, it may work as a force that relaxes things. I mean the most popular daytime show in much of the Arab world is Oprah. Now I happen to think that Oprah is probably going to do more to transform the Muslim world than John Bolton and Dick Cheney and all the rest but these things work slowly. You have to be patient but that's the second hypothesis is that something in modernization and in American culture is going to prevent these reactions from growing up.

WOLFE: I think that's a very – I'll ask people if they want to raise questions and start coming to the microphone but while they do that, your first point about now I understand it much better that when you get a consensus, there will be a rejectionist spin off from it which will in a sense start a new round and I think that's really fascinating but I would respond this way, that one of the amazing aspects of the capaciousness of American culture is that it not only defines the consensus, it defines the anti-consensus and so we have a profound tradition in America of spin offs, of people who reject, going back to the earliest days, carrying through the Emersonianism and so on.

I mean there's always been the Amish and other groups have and a place has been sort of made for them. Our culture allows that to happen, so if by spinning off you mean rejecting the culture, it's not completely that. It's also conforming to a certain kind of role and then again for me, it then always comes back to the normative question. While I can see that that process provides tremendous benefits in terms of stability for the system, I wonder if you don't lose the voice of dissent or antagonism through that process. Anyway, thank you for patience. I think we wanted to leave about 15 or 20 minutes for your questions and try to do exactly that. So I'll start on this side, go to that side, and if you have, please come to one of the microphones and speak into the microphone. 45 seconds. That's the rule.

Q: All right. I think I can do it more quickly than that. The assumption has been that there's one monolithic American culture but surely culture varies in the mid-West, here on the East Coast and so on. So I was hoping that perhaps some of you could give thumb sketches of the culture and of the religion and the interactions between them. Just divide up America a bit. I don't know how to. And it would be great if you could do it in some of the detail that Mr. Lilla was able to bring using Michigan as an example. That's all. Thanks.

LILLA: Well, Alan, you probably know more about that than any of us up here. I mean since you've really studied all these different –

WOLFE: Well, since you brought up that dreaded name Sarah Palin, let me just say that Sarah Palin strikes me as an Evangelical with almost nothing Southern about her. Her Evangelicalism is a very Western Libertarian kind that has much more to do with issues about guns and other things where as opposed to a more prohibitive sin obsessed neo-Calvinistic form that Evangelicals can take in the South. So I do think there are profound regional differences in the way religion gets expressed.

STEINFELS: There are. I grew up in Chicago and left and have lived in New York since I was 23 years old and one of the things you learn very quickly is that in Chicago, Catholics were among the original settlers of Chicago. In New York, they were latecomers. I mean all the Protestants got there first. And then the Jews came. My point is that I think even national religious groups have very different expressions depending historically on when they landed there and who was already there and who came after and what kind of contentious relationships usually marked the beginning of these. So I think that was a good question and I think it's even more true of Seattle and the West Coast, etc.

WOLFE: All right. Go ahead over there.

Q: Yes, I just have a comment to something Margaret said that I'm going to take home and think about. You mentioned just generic versus specific religions and I love that and I've got to think about that because so much of the talk of religion bothers me because it always comes from a specific religious viewpoint and that's the reason there's been discussion about accommodation meeting points because it's always very specific. I come from a more spiritual background instead of a specific religion and that works for me but the other comment and I wanted to go back to Peter. I had a question. That the Black church being different which I believe it is, is that because when the Blacks came here, they were not Christians and the Black church is now the result of those Blacks encountering Christianity and creating the Black church as the impact of their economy and environment on their beliefs?

PARIS: Well, I argue that African American Christianity is a hybrid of types between traditional African values and understandings and what they, how they appropriate it, the liberating elements of Christianity much, much later. Much, much later after they were here enslaved because a good deal of that time of slavery, they were not permitted the option of being converted to Christianity because they were viewed as not being fully human and therefore not in need of Christianity or if they were to become Christian then this would imply a certain equality at the religious level with whites and that might imply in turn certain demands for equal civic status.

And so it took a long while for the powers that be to work that out in order to finally conclude that a conversion of the soul did not imply a conversion of civic status and then the Methodists and the Baptists could start Evangelizing them while keeping them in slavery and hopefully Christian slaves would be better than non-Christian slaves and so forth and there's a whole worldview that goes with that. So I think it's a complicated question and the answer is equally complicated.

Q: Hi. I'd like to invite the panel to comment on what seems to me to have been a relatively recent change in the role of religion in American public life. Am I remembering this correctly but isn't it relatively recent that American presidents have been publicly declaring their faith? That it started with Jimmy Carter and before that, it was thought to be somewhat, would have been thought to be bizarre or unnecessary, maybe even in bad taste? Can you imagine Dwight Eisenhower standing up or Richard Nixon standing up and saying I am a Christian? What changed? Why is it different?

MEACHAM: Well, Eisenhower did. He went to the Presbyterian Church, the National Presbyterian Church. Thomas Jefferson attended religious services in the House of Representatives in Washington. Jackson declined to declare his faith because he thought it would appear craven. It was the one bit of discretion in his life. He resisted calls for the formation of a Christian party in politics. I'd like to think it was principle. I think it was because he couldn't control it but he did. I disagree. I think that presidents have been overtly religious more or less throughout our history and to the point where the only thing Franklin Roosevelt said in public on D-Day was to read a prayer of his own composition. JFK clearly was open about his faith while arguing it shouldn't be relevant.

STEINFELS: Don't you – it seems to me that odd religions get called – I mean presidents who have odd religions like Catholicism or they're Baptists or –

MEACHAM: Taft and Unitarianism provoked a significant statement from TR about that.

STEINFELS: Right, they might be required to say more about their odd religion in the religious context of their time than you would normally expect from an Eisenhower who – did he not say as long as you have a religion, I don't care what religion you – is that false?

WOLFE: It is false actually.

MEACHAM: I could take the rest of the afternoon to correct that. Every religion professor in America gets that wrong.

STEINFELS: Scratch that.

WOLFE: Actually, I'm more in agreement with your question in the sense that I remember an era when as you say, the question never arose. To this day, I wonder how many people can recall what Hubert Humphrey's religion was or Lyndon Baines Johnson or, the example I always use, Spiro Agnew, who was actually Church of England. There was a time I think when we didn't pay as much attention to it as we do now. I often try to say that in 1960, one of the candidates running for president had to hide his religious beliefs and claim that his church would never influence how he conducted himself in office. It wasn't John F. Kennedy. It was Richard Nixon who was a member of the Society of Friends.

LILLA: Well, can I just, very quickly, say something about the premise of the question or what I took to be the premise of the question, which was that the presence of this declaration represents somehow an insertion of something that wasn't there before. Earlier presidents, if they declared their religion, it would be a sectarian claim because everyone was religious. It's only in the context of secularization that you're invited to say something because you face the prospect of a secular culture, but it doesn't necessarily represent the incursion of religion in the political sphere as we've been talking here. It also reciprocally represents the capture and the talking to death of religious people and that's why liberals are slowly starting to see that by engaging them in their own terms, a lot of what the political system does is captures and domesticates these things.

Q: Yeah, but to speak to something that is undomesticated, Professor Paris addressed it earlier in part by raising the question of the African American Civil Rights Movement and religious groups in relation to it, both resisting and favoring, but that's not the only Civil Rights Movement we have operating in America right now. Women are still struggling for Civil Rights and certainly Prop 8 and all the gay and lesbian civil rights and particularly the idea of marriage equality is a civil rights issue and not principally a religious issue and I was wondering if you could address the question of equality as it relates to Alan's original question. How does culture, in this case national equality of citizens, affect religiosity one way or the other?

STEINFELS: What's the question?

LILLA: I didn't understand the question.

MEACHAM: I didn't get the question there.

WOLFE: Maybe I can try and see if I got you right. I mean I think it was in response to the discussion we were having here about Proposition 8 and a similar thought occurred to me, and that is that what was really truly striking about the Civil Rights Movement, the African American Civil Rights

Movement was that the idea of rights were associated with it and while terms liberal and conservative can have vague meanings, the term rights is a pretty specific meaning and it's usually associated with the idea of equality before the law and if one views the right of gays to marry, that they should have the same right that heterosexual people have, it does seem to be problematic for people who were in the forefront of rights in one campaign to be against it in another. Is that kind of what you're driving at?

Q: Yeah, but it's also the question of churches and religions and how they address the question of rights that may differ from their particular theologies or their established positions. We certainly saw it in the case of the Civil Rights Movement where some churches were active for the rights and others were accommodating of the segregationist structures and I think we see that in the case of the search for women's equality but also gay and lesbian equality as well.

PARIS: It seems to me that one of the things that the Civil Rights Movement demonstrated so clearly is that the people who are most affected negatively by any particular system, they are the people who have got to come forward and claim their rights to justice and equality and I think that those, that vast coalition of forces that eventually grew to support the Civil Rights struggle for equal citizenship for Blacks, lots of those people began to find their own voices. Women began to find their voices once again and the women's movement came alive. Stonewall came right immediately after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the sexual issues came alive. Native Americans, Mexican Americans, all students claiming their rights as citizens in universities to sit in on faculty meetings.

It was an absolute revolutionary idea at that time that students would have anything to say about governance in the universities and the anti-Vietnam people who had formerly taken for granted that if they were to be drafted they should go and the whole business of resisting the draft and so forth. All of these people, I would argue, found their voices in this Civil Rights Movement. Did the members of the Civil Rights Movement support all of those? Not at all. It doesn't work that way. Human beings are greedy and egotistic and parochial and all of that and all of that comes to bear on each and every one of those movements and the movements that they are built on themselves.

STEINFELS: Don't you think one element in here, I mean I'm not a lawyer, but it seems to me the question of marriage and family in many ways, many religious people think is not a civil right in the same sense that citizenship is a civil right and if you read some of these blogs or listen to some of the arguments, I mean and if you wanted to talk natural rights, I think that the part of the resistance to gay marriage or same sex marriage resides in this view of many people that this is somehow pre-dates or it comes before

something like civil law and civil rule and that you will see many people who oppose gay marriage are in fact in favor of partnerships or same sex unions and it's because it is not called marriage. Now maybe this is just a semantic issue but I think that is part of where the resistance resides.

PARIS: But I think, Margaret, we have to keep in mind it took this country 400 years to acknowledge that African Americans had rights, you know? So it was a long time but if you keep it on the agenda, it tends to eventually, even after 400 years, to become sort of domesticated.

STEINFELS: Right, I would not disagree with that.

MEACHAM: Can I just say quickly this does show implicit in the question that theological debates within denominations and faiths do have a cultural and political impact.

PARIS: True.

MEACHAM: For instance, I mean my view of gay marriage is there's a hell of a lot more in the Bible about why divorce is bad. So when divorced people attack gay marriage, that's always fun. But if you can settle those debates within the denominations then almost immediately there's a political implication. See the Church of Latter Day Saints and their involvement in California.

WOLFE: Go ahead.

Q: My question has to do about another topic similar to this one and that's about abortion. I'm curious what the panel feels that talking about America as a religious nation in terms of people who actually go to church as opposed to many other countries where people talk about being of a faith but they don't participate in an active way and I'm curious about the idea of abortion that maintains its sense of being legal and whether you think that that is going to change at all in this next administration in terms of the discussions about it and what effect that this continued discussion has on our nation as a tension of what people of faith believe and then how the law is expressed in terms of those beliefs.

WOLFE: I'm going to take all three questions and then ask you – thanks for being brief and we'll respond to all of them.

Q: Sure, and my question is in some ways related to that and it's geared towards Mr. Meacham and it does bring back or bring into this conversation this generational dimension that we were talking about earlier and just thinking about how Gen X Evangelicals are beginning to move beyond some of these cultural wars that have dominated the last 30 years and now that we have

President-Elect Obama, himself not a product of the Baby Boomer Generation, and the different ways he's talking about approaching issues like abortion, realizing that the butting of the heads that have been taking place needs to stop and we need to find common ground and the unique ways that he's been going about that and I just wanted to hear more about some of these generational aspects and how we're moving beyond these cultural wars.

WOLFE: Thank you and the final question here.

Q: So I wanted to get back to the discussion you were having a couple minutes ago about justice, particularly racial justice which seems to me to be a moral question and therefore firmly a religious question as well, that justice to me is a moral idea and what – I don't think that people just spontaneously get better. So what happened over 400 years to get to the point we are now and what is that relationship between culture and politics and religion that's going to finish the process for justice, for not just racial justice but ethnic justice and gender justice for everyone in the United States because I think if we could understand how it's overcome, we could make the world a better place a little faster.

WOLFE: So last comments from each of you and hopefully you can address as many of those questions as possible.

LILLA: The only question I want to address is the abortion question because one of the opportunities the Democratic Party has right now is to capture the Catholic vote and not just white ethnics but also Hispanic votes and one way to do that is to change the Democratic Party's discourse about abortion and for me, that means moving away from a discourse of rights and instead talk about differences of opinion about this and ways of, to repeat Bill Clinton, to make it safe, legal, and rare. I think Americans aren't aware that getting an abortion later in the term is far more difficult in every advanced European country than in the United States.

It's easier to get abortions here than anywhere else and that's because it's not thought of in terms of rights but also in terms of health, the family. They have ethics panels that have to meet in certain cases in hospitals. There are ways of dealing with this question in an intelligent way but we've been on a path since Roe V. Wade that has made it difficult for the party to reach a lot of people they should be reaching and I hope that the current administration will see that they have a real opportunity here.

WOLFE: Thank you. Last comments from anyone else?

STEINFELS: Well, it seems to me Jon mentioned that this is a critically important election and one of the reasons it is so is that the Democrats once again somehow made room for discussions about religion. I think one of the most

important moves in this election was the abortion reduction plank in their platform and by that, I gather what is meant is a pursuit of those social and economic conditions which cause women and men to decide that abortion is what is needed in their situation and that if you reduce those causes, you can bring them down, if not to make them rare, rarer and I for one think that the Democratic Party has made terrible mistakes over several elections by simply not emphasizing the social and cultural items in its agenda that could help to reduce abortions.

I personally do not think that Roe v. Wade is going to be overturned anytime soon if ever and that the real issue for the Catholic bishops who have said a good deal in this election and for this administration is to pursue the question of what causes and what could limit people's desire to have abortions which I don't think is an easy decision ever for anybody who decides it.

PARIS: I'd like to say something about the issue that was raised about progress and moral progress on race and other issues. I think that it is extremely important for there to be public visibility of the issue. We're on the way towards dealing with it and resolving it, but when one prevents the public visibility then that really is a problem for the quest for justice. The Civil Rights Movement was extremely important in simply highlighting in a visible way for America to see the problem that the vast majority of Blacks and all Blacks to some extent were experiencing. But it wasn't until the federal government eventually stepped in and embraced the values that the Civil Rights Movement was putting forward and when Lyndon Johnson said "We shall overcome" – those words in his mouth made a tremendous difference along with a number of other things in his campaign to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed and then on the basis of that Civil Rights Act, various other rights for women and the disabled and various other people were written into law which then helped the process tremendously of realizing an advance along those lines on racial grounds.

And similarly, I think that's where I think that all people should come forward and say that we are hurting and we need to be heard, that we need to help those people with their tasks of making their issues visible and then the public, there's something healing that eventually begins to emerge as the public begins to attend in public debate to the issue.

WOLFE: Jon, last one.

MEACHAM: Very quickly on the generational question: My colleague, George Will, I'm sure a popular figure here in Massachusetts, pointed out that his daughter, Victoria, who is probably in her early 20s, did not have any understanding whatever of why he would oppose gay marriage or absolute acceptance of homosexuality. It just did not translate at all. This is a woman who grew up in George Will's house. So I think there's, as with everything,

the phrase Obama has used, the “Joshua Generation,” I just think that as with every generation, some of the earlier generation’s struggles, the blood sweat, toil, and tears of the people who brought us ten yards forward is taken for granted and so not in a bad way but that’s reality.

One generation’s evil is the next generation’s antique and I think that that’s happening on a lot of questions. The Evangelical shift I find fascinating. It’s not a huge one, but it’s certainly atmospheric in a sense of global climate change, all sorts of issues that are beyond the more traditional, more familiar sexual morality questions of the religious right. And finally, on the progress point, the story of America is the expanding definition of the mainstream and trying to actually make what Jefferson wrote in Philadelphia true and it’s three yards and a cloud of dust.

WOLFE: Well, I hope you agree with me that these were terrific, intelligent, thoughtful comments about a subject of burning importance to us and will join me in thanking our panelists for this session.

END OF SESSION 1

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